

Appendix B

Terrorist Planning Cycle

**“The main point is to select targets where success is 100% assured”
- Dr. George Habash, founder, PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine)**

Terrorist operations are typically meticulously prepared to minimize risk and achieve the highest probability of success. They focus on avoiding the opponents’ strengths and concentrating on their weaknesses. Emphasis is on maximizing security and target effects. In practice that means the least number of personnel, and the most effective* weapons practicable. To accomplish this, extensive planning is conducted, with an emphasis on target surveillance and reconnaissance.

Collection against potential targets may continue for years before an operation is decided upon. While some targets may be “soft” enough for shorter periods of observation, the information gathering will still be intense. Also, operations planned or underway may be altered, delayed, or cancelled entirely due to changes to the target or local conditions.

Terrorists plan campaigns to combine successive achievements of operational objectives into accomplishing strategic goals. Even though we refer to a terrorist operation having a physical “objective”, this physical objective is in reality an intermediate objective. The casualties, destruction, or threats thereof that the operation accomplishes must be properly exploited to reach the target audience. The psychological impact on that audience is the true objective of any terrorist operation. While the assassination of a troublesome police official may provide other tactical advantages, it is the psychological effect on the target audience and its ultimate support of strategic goals that is the true objective.

There is no universal “staff school” model for terrorist planning, but experience and success has shown terrorists what works. Terrorist organizations exchange personnel and training with each other, and study the methods and operational successes of groups they have no direct contact with. Innovation is a proven key component of operational success. Using new weapons or technology, or old systems in innovative, unexpected ways, allows terrorists to defeat or avoid defensive measures.

Terrorist operational planning can be analyzed according to requirements common to all operations. The planning and operation cycle below is valid for traditional hierarchically organized groups, as well as the decentralized “network” type organizations. The differences between the two organizations are the location of decision making at the various steps of the cycle, and the method of task organizing and providing support for the operation.

Phase I: Broad Target Selection

This phase is the collection of information on a large number of

**“Information gathering is a continuous operation”
- Irish Republican Army’s *Handbook for Volunteers*
of the Irish Republican Army, 1956.**

* Note: “Effective” in this case need not mean modern or destructive, but most suitable to cause the desired target effects. Knives, machetes, and other edged weapons have been extensively used against terrorist victims in the modern era because target audiences view them as particularly bloody and barbarous.

potential targets, some of which may never be attacked, or seriously considered for attack. Personnel that are not core members of the terrorist organization, but are either sympathizers or dupes, and who may not be aware of what their information will be used for usually conduct this data collection. This phase also includes open source and general information collection. Some features of this type of collection are:

- Stories from newspapers, other media and journalistic sources often provide key information on the target.
- Potential targets are screened based on symbolic value and their potential to generate high profile media attention.
- Objectives of the terrorist group influence the selection of a person or facility as a worthy target. This includes the likely casualty rate achieved by the attack.
- The number of preliminary targets that can be screened is limited only by the capabilities of the group to collect information from sympathizers and open sources.

Targets that are considered vulnerable and which would further the terrorist organization's goals are selected for the next phase of intelligence collection.

Phase II: Intelligence Gathering and Surveillance

Targets showing potential vulnerabilities are given a higher priority of effort. This priority establishes the requirement to gather additional information on the targets' patterns over time. The type of surveillance employed depends on the target type. Elements of information typically gathered include:

- Practices/Procedures/Routines - For facilities this includes scheduled deliveries, work shift changes, identification procedures and other observable routines. For individuals, it can include regularly scheduled errands (laundry pick up every third day, etc) and appointments.
- Residence & Workplace – This category applies primarily to the physical layout and individual activities at the two places the target typically spends the most time.
- Transportation/Routes of Travel – For individuals, this is the mode of transport and common routes to any regular destination (house, work, gym, school, etc.). For facilities, it addresses ingress and egress points, types of vehicles allowed on the grounds, availability of transportation into the target site, etc.
- Security Measures – This topic includes a myriad of potential collection areas, depending on the complexity of the security around the target. Presence of a guard force; the reaction time of response units; any hardening of structures, barriers, or sensors; personnel, package, and vehicle screening procedures; and the type and frequency of emergency reaction drills are all examples of key collection objectives. This is one of the most important areas of information for attack site selection, since the intent is to bypass and avoid security measures, and be able to strike the target during any period.

Phase III: Specific Target Selection

Selection of a target for actual operational planning considers some of the following factors:

- Does success affect a larger audience than the immediate victim(s)?
- Will the target attract high profile media attention?
- Does success make the desired statement to the correct target audience(s)?
- Is the effect consistent with objectives of the group?
- Does the target provide an advantage to the group by demonstrating its capabilities?
- What are the costs versus benefits of conducting the operation?

A decision to proceed requires continued intelligence collection against the chosen target. Targets not receiving immediate consideration will still be collected against for future opportunities.

Phase IV: Pre-attack Surveillance and Planning

Members of the actual operational cells begin to appear during this phase. Either trained intelligence and surveillance personnel, or members of the cell organized to conduct the operation conduct this phase. Consequently, the level of intelligence tradecraft and operational competency goes up correspondingly. This phase gathers information on the target's current patterns over time, usually days to weeks. It allows the attack team to confirm the information gathered from previous surveillance and reconnaissance activities. The areas of concern are essentially the same as in Phase II, but with greater focus based upon the planning conducted thus far.

The type of surveillance employed depends on the target's activities. The information gained is then used to:

- Conduct security studies.
- Conduct detailed preparatory operations.
- Recruit specialized operatives (if needed).
- Procure a base of operations in the target area (safe houses, caches, etc.).
- Design and test escape routes.
- Decide on type of weapon or attack.

Phase V: Rehearsals

As with conventional military operations, rehearsals are conducted to improve the odds of success, confirm planning assumptions, and develop contingencies. Terrorists also rehearse to test security reactions to particular attack profiles. Terrorists use both their own operatives and unwitting people to test target reactions. Typical rehearsals include:

- Deployment into target area.
- Actions on the objective
- Escape routes
- Equipment and weapon performance.

Tests in the target area will be conducted to confirm:

- Target information gathered to date.
- Target pattern of activities.
- Physical layout of target or operation area.
- Security force reactions (state of alert, timing, size of response, equipment, routes).

Phase VI: Actions on the Objective

Once terrorists reach this stage of their program, the odds are clearly against the target. Several different analyses conclude that once operations are initiated, the success rate for the terrorist is in the ninety-percent range. Terrorists will minimize time spent conducting the actual operation to reduce their vulnerability to discovery or countermeasures. With the exception of barricade-style hostage taking operations, terrorists plan to complete their actions before even nearby security forces can react.

Terrorists conducting planned operations possess important tactical advantages. Since they are the attacker, they possess all the advantages of initiative, giving them:

- Surprise.
- Choice of time, place and conditions of attack.
- Employment of diversions and secondary or follow-up attacks.
- Employment of security and support positions to neutralize target reaction forces and security measures.

Because of the extensive preparation through surveillance and reconnaissance, enemy security measures will be planned for and neutralized. It is a fact of life that any countermeasure can be countered in turn. If security cameras are detected, they can be avoided or disabled as necessary. Guards can be overcome or killed. Hardened vehicles or buildings will result in the use of larger or more effective explosive devices or direct fire weapons. Although security measures may complicate the attackers' problems, they do not confer any guarantee against attack.

Phase VII: Escape and Exploitation

Escape plans are usually well thought-out and executed. Many terrorists want to survive the operation and escape. It further enhances the effect of fear and terror from a successful operation if the perpetrators get away "clean". The exception to this is suicide operations, where the impact is enhanced by the apparent willingness to die. Even in suicide attacks, however, there are usually support personnel and "handlers" who must deliver the suicide asset to the target, and subsequently make their escape.

Exploitation is the primary objective of the operation. The operation must be properly exploited and publicized to achieve its intended effect. Media control measures, prepared statements, and a host of other preparations are made to effectively exploit a successful operation. These will be timed to take advantage of media cycles for the selected target audiences.

Unsuccessful operations are disavowed when possible. The perception that a group has failed severely damages the organization's prestige and makes it appear vulnerable, or worse, ineffective. Once a terrorist organization is perceived as ineffective, it is very difficult to impact target audiences.

In addition to the impact on the opponent, successful attacks bring favorable attention, notoriety and support (money, recruits, etc.) to the group conducting them. If the group conducting the operation subscribes to a revolutionary ideology, they will see each success as gradually inspiring more revolutionary fervor in the population. Any success encourages the terrorists to conduct further operations, and improves their ability to do so through increased support and experience.